



SHRINES AND TEMPLES OF NEPAL

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SHRINES AND TEMPLES OF NEPAL

by D. L. SNELLGROVE

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Nepalese culture is the smallness of its actual physical limits. A few pagoda-style temples have been built in the provincial townships of central Nepal, e. g. Nawākot, Trisuli Bazār, Ārughāt, Pokhara, and as far away as Muktināth, but the whole historical culture seems to have been concentrated within the Nepal Valley itself. Moreover all these temples outside the Valley are very recent, and apart from small Buddhist wayside shrines and *caityas*, there is no trace of any other developed civilization until one reaches the Tibetan areas of Nepal's northern frontier (1). The lower Himalayan valleys have always been open to penetration from the Indian plain, and after the Moslem conquests religious refugees and military fortune-seekers pressed far into the foothills. They have usually intermarried with the hillmen who were there before them, and have sometimes introduced forms of society of an Indian pattern, but only in the Nepal Valley does there seem to have developed an imposing civilization (2). The exquisite craft of Nepalese wood-carving will be recognized far beyond the confines of the Valley, but the Valley was its source and its home. Nowadays the term Nepalese has a far wider significance, indeed almost a changed meaning, but when we speak of Nepalese civilization, we can only mean Newar civilization.

The origin of the Newars is obscure. One would surmise that they are originally akin to the neighbouring peoples of Tibetan stock, the Tamangs, who still live around the Valley, and the Gurungs further west. It is certain that, however much they have been affected by intermarriage with various waves of people from the Indian side, they have always remained conscious of a fundamental kinship with Tibetan-type peoples. Newar relations with India are very complex, and for mere simplification it is convenient to divide Nepalese history into two main periods from approximately 200 A.D. to 1 000, and from 1 000 to the present day.

(1) To the far west of the Dhaulagiri massif Professor Tucci has found important traces of Hindu and Buddhist civilization, which was flourishing at least up to the end of the 14th century. See G. TUCCI, *Preliminary Report on Two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal*, Rome, 1956, pp. 40-41. But although it now properly forms part of modern Nepal, this area used to belong culturally to the Himalayan areas further west. On my own journey up the Bheri Valley to the east of Professor Tucci's discoveries, I found much of general cultural interest, but not a trace of developed civilization south of the main Himalayan range, except of course for those areas which have been affected by Tibetan civilization from the north. The few Hindu temples which exist are all modern, and except for one imposing building at Tibrikot, they are just simple shrines. See my *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, Cassirer, Oxford, 1961, pp. 27-29.

(2) Even at Tanzing (ancient Palpa), the importance of which in earlier centuries is well attested, Tucci found nothing in evidence of past greatness. See his *Tra Giungle e Pagode*, Rome, 1958, pp. 103-105.

During the first period this small self-contained kingdom was ruled by a fairly consistently strong line of kings, first of the Licchavi dynasty (up to the beginning of the 7th century) and thereafter by a Thākuri dynasty. Inscriptions attest the introduction of Sanskrit as the official language at the very latest from the 5th century onwards, and the very large number of Sanskrit terms which have been turned into Newāri bear witness to the strong influence of Indian life and manners upon the Newars. Both Buddhist religious practice and the great Brahmanical gods were introduced into the country; monasteries and temples were built and land allocated to their support. Moreover by adopting Sanskrit as their literary language, the Newars entered fully into the stream of Indian civilization. From the start everything must have been Indian: styles of writing and painting, of carving and sculpture, of building and decorating. Thereafter whatever changes took place in northern India would eventually be imitated in Nepal (1).

The name of Nepal is attested from the 4th century by the inscription of Samudragupta at Allahabad, where it appears listed as one of the tributary states of the Indian monarch (2). The earliest inscriptions in Nepal itself date from the 5th century in the reign of Mānadeva. There is some evidence to suggest that Vṛṣadeva, his great-grandfather, who presumably lived towards the end of the 4th century, was a Buddhist (3). By this time Pātan had been founded as a Buddhist city, a fact to which the four great « Aśoka » *caityas* placed to the four directions, bear witness. Monasteries (*vihāra*) had been founded within this city and probably also north of the Bagmati River, in what is now the old part of Kathmandu (4). There were three important hill-shrines in the Valley consecrated to Indian divinities, *Kailāsakūṭa* to Śiva, *Cāngu* to Viṣṇu, and *Śeṅgu* to the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. The town of Bhatgaon (Newāri *Khvopa*) was already existing in the 6th century (5); it presumably consisted then of the present north-eastern corner, where all the *vihāras* (except one) and their remains are concentrated, and where there are also two ancient tanks.

All that actually survives from the earlier period are the 89 stone inscriptions in Gupta characters (recently edited so conveniently by Dr. Gnoli and representing almost a complete collection), numerous little so-called *Aśoka-caityas*, of which more will be said below, and a number of scattered images, especially of Śākyamuni (always a standing cloaked figure, e. g. fig. 1) (6), Avalokiteśvara, Śiva and partner (Umā-Maheśvara, e. g. fig. 2),

(1) Primitive Newāri was as different from Sanskrit as Tibetan has remained to this day. Yet when the Tibetans came within the orbit of Indian civilization in the 7th century, their first task was the creating of an alphabet, in which they could write their own language. Perhaps they had learned from their earlier contacts in Central Asia at translating was a feasible task. In any event by equipping themselves with their own literary language, they laid the foundations of an independent Tibetan cultural tradition.

(2) FLEET, *Corp. Inscr. Ind.*, III, p. 8.

(3) Raniero GNOLI, *Nepalese Inscriptions in Gupta Characters*, Rome, 1956 (two volumes), Part I, p. 2, lines 7-10, and especially p. 116, line 9: *śrīmān babhūva Vṛṣadeva iti pralīto rājottamaḥ Sugataśāsanapakṣapātī*.

(4) E. g. the *Dhvāka-bāhā*, Kathmandu [3]; see below p. 97. [The figure in square brackets after a city-name, Kathmandu, Pātan or Bhatgaon, refers to the lists of *vihāras* on pp. 117-120 and to the accompanying sketch-maps, on which every *vihāra* here mentioned is located.]

(5) GNOLI, *Nepalese Inscriptions*, p. 32, line 3, and p. 33, line 3.

(6) The illustrations come from the Author's collection.

FIG. 1. — Cā-bāhi. Standing Buddha-image
VIth-VIIIth cent ?

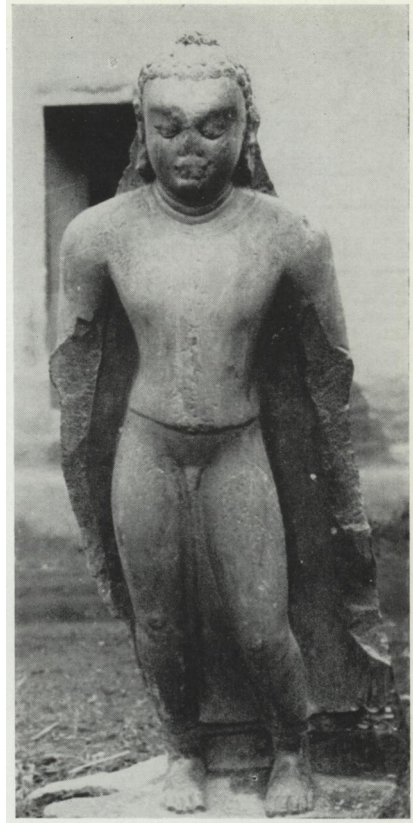
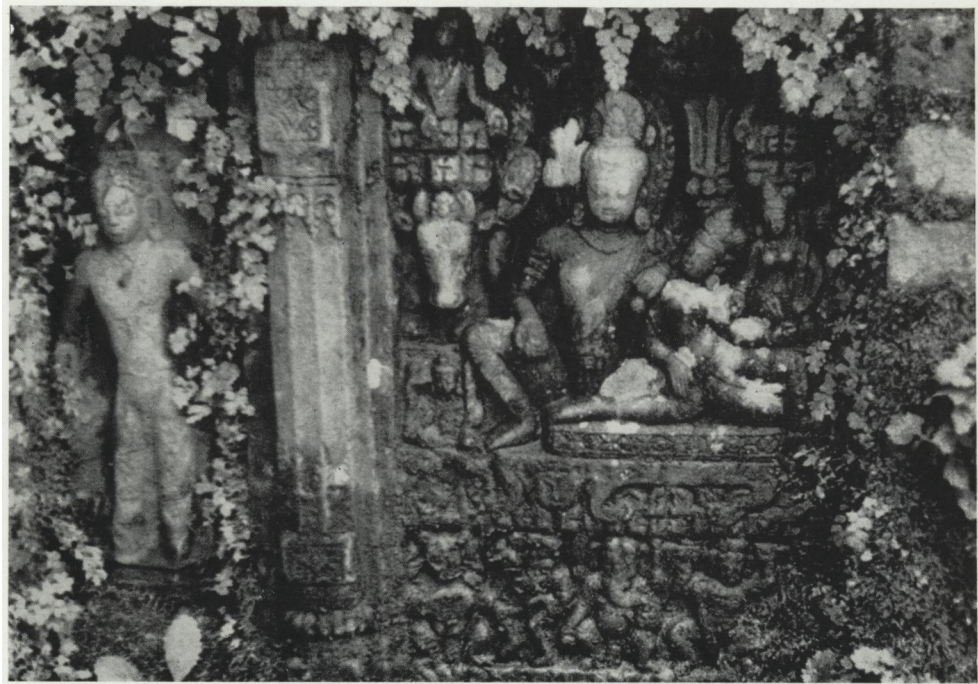


FIG. 2. — Pātan. Small images
of Buddha and Umā-Maheśvara
in a *pranālī* (watering-place)
in front of the Tamgaḥ-bāhā



and Viṣṇu. The actual mounds of three of the great directional *caityas* of Pātan may still preserve their original form, and the present shrines at *Cāngu* and on the western *Śengu* summit stand exactly where the original shrines must have stood. Kailāsakūṭa was perhaps the summit of the hill, still in fact known as Kailāsa, which rises immediately behind the present temple of Paśupatiṇāth, Śiva's main shrine in the Valley (1). As for the monasteries (*viḥāra*), mentioned in the early inscriptions, only one is possibly identifiable by name with a present-day site (2). We have therefore but the scantiest material with which to create a shadowy picture of the beginnings of Newar culture. There is no doubt that excavation would add greatly to present knowledge, but so far the Nepalese Government has felt unable to give permission for such work.

Thus from the earliest known period Buddhist monasteries and Brahmanical temples were built in close proximity. There was no more reason for conflict between the two

(1) I am not therefore fully persuaded by Petech's interpretation of the phrase *śrī-Yaṅgala-deśe śrī-Kailāsakūṭa-vaja* (see his *Mediaeval History of Nepal*, Rome, 1958, p. 200). Pātan (*Yaṅgala*) was the main and presumably only city of the Nepal Valley; hence the Kailāsa Hill, some three miles distant, could be well described as « within the realm of Pātan ».

(2) This is the *Mānadevaviḥāra* or *Srīmānaviḥāra* (GNOLI, *Nepalese Inscriptions*, p. 50, line 8, and p. 102, line 13), which may be identified with the *Cuka-bāhā*, Pātan [5], for it is still known as the *Mānadevasaṃskaritamahāviḥāra*. There is nothing about the present building to suggest any connection. Other monastic sites can be related with the Licchavi period (e. g. see p. 97 below), but they cannot be connected in name.

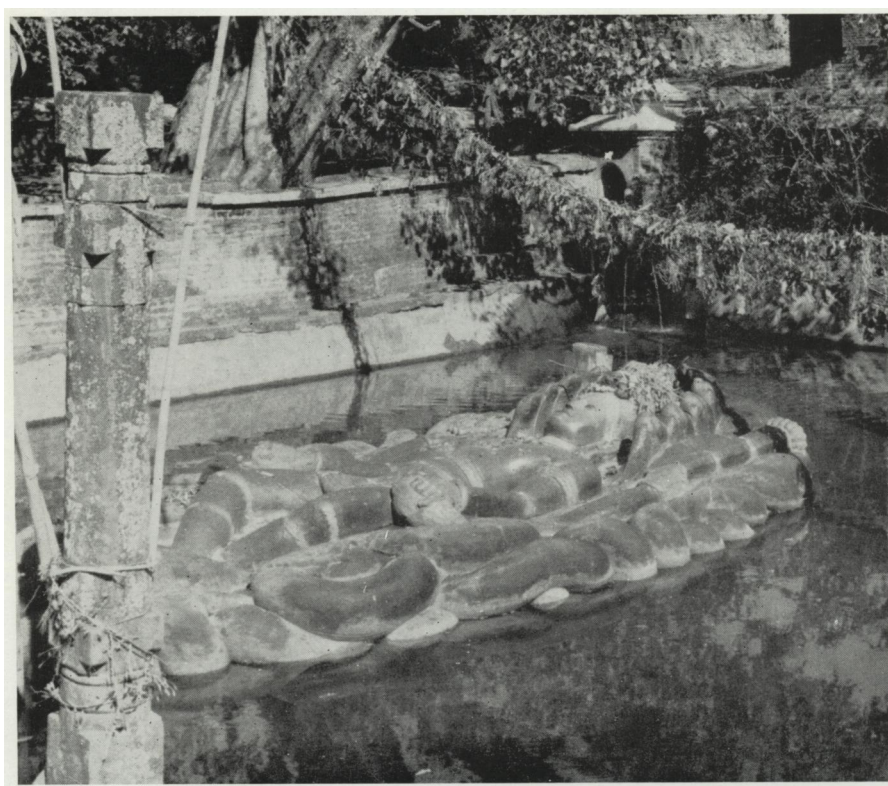


FIG. 3. — Buḍha-Nīlkaṇṭha. Image of Nārāyaṇa

religions in Nepal than in the India of those days. The Hindu caste-system can have had no real counterpart in the 5th century A.D., except of course in the sense that any traditional ordering of society is a form of caste. Notions of purity and impurity were still religious rather than social concepts, and certainly in Nepal the layfolk would have been little concerned with them except on specifically religious occasions. There would doubtless be opportunities for doctrinal disputes and jealous intrigues between Brahmanical and Buddhist prelates, but both lived their lives within the same society. Both belonged to the same general traditions of « Hindu » (*viz.* Indian) culture. Kings inevitably tended to give more attention to the Brahmanical gods, because of their social dependence upon the Brahmans. At the same time they could support Buddhist institutions, but rather more distantly. To have become a Buddhist in the full sense would lead to one's contracting out of society. Apart from Vṛṣadeva in the 4th century (mentioned above p. 4), only one Nepalese king, namely Rudradeva in the 12th century, is said to have become a Buddhist and thus to have ended his days as a monk (1). Newar society generally, as distinct from the court, must have been especially sympathetic to Buddhism, for whereas the inmates of the *vihāras* were mainly Newars, the Brahmans were always foreigners from India. As generations passed, they too of course became part of Newār society, but always a small one, however influential they might be. It is significant that the Tibetans, who made contact with Nepal in the 7th century and continued going there in search of texts and religious masters for the next seven or eight centuries, always conceived of it as a Buddhist country. It was thus that Nepal became a kind of half-way stage between Tibet and central India. The main trade-route from Lhasa continued to pass through this little valley until the beginning of the 20th century, when the new and easier route through Kalimpong began to steal the trade away. In the past it must have been upon this trade that Nepalese prosperity and hence the whole of its developed civilization was based.

The sort of Buddhism which the Tibetans found in Nepal in the 7th to 9th centuries is reflected in the type of Buddhism which was imported into Tibet. The Lhasa kings clearly favoured Mahāyāna teachings of an orthodox monastic kind, and these they must have found in the *vihāras* of Nepal. But the traditions of the tantric yogins, which developed into the ordered religious practice of married men, certainly already had its representatives in both countries.

Whereas in Tibet both traditions, that of monk and married practiser, have continued to exist side by side, in Nepal the « monks » all became married men and ceased even to be practisers of the doctrine except in a special social sense. Since they all go through a ceremony (*bare-chuyegu*) in youth, so taking the vows of monkhood (in order to preserve what has now become their caste), they continue the very curious tradition of ensuring that they remain renegade monks (2). The religious masters (*ācārya* or more precisely *vajrācārya*, « masters of absolute power ») are now likewise all married men with property

(1) See PETECH, *Mediaeval History of Nepal*, p. 68.

(2) *Bare-chuyegu* probably means literally « affixing (the title of) *bare* (*viz.* *vandya*, « worthy one ») ». The same verb is used in the expression *nāma-chuyegu*, « affixing a name ».

rights in the *vihāras* (1). Continuing to function as priests (« Buddhist brahmans »), they may claim a higher status than the monks, but they all belong to the single category of *bare* (Sanskrit *vandya*). It is certainly an interesting problem, how monks, who were once self-professed and presumably came from all classes of Newar society, and spiritual masters, who once owed their position to their personal knowledge and reputation, should have become an hereditary caste, closed to the rests of society. This is something which has occurred in no other Buddhist country. Two factors must have produced the change : a total loss of contact with the essentials of Buddhist doctrine in all but its ritual and devotional forms, and the ever-present example of married Brahman priests with their high social prestige. Social pressure upon the monasteries must always have been very strong, just because the Valley is so small.

The question of when this change came about leads to a brief consideration of the second main period of Newar relations with India (*viz.* from about 1000 A.D. to the present day). While the period up to 1000 A.D. gives an overall impression of stability and constructive development, the latter period seems to be characterized by general political and social instability. Two petty kingdoms, centring on Pātan and Bhatgaon, appear in this little Valley, and interminable disputes and mutual rivalries weaken Nepal at the very time, when it is most threatened by external foes (2). A new dynasty of uncertain origin, the Mallas, replaced the last of the Thākuris in 1200, and Malla remains the dynastic name of all Nepalese kings up to the Gorkha conquest of 1768.

By the 13th century Buddhism had practically disappeared from India. Moslem rulers replaced the former Hindu ones, and instead of tolerant « Hindu » kings, the Brahmans became the controllers of what remained of organized Hindu society. Buddhism still existed in Nepal, but it was no longer strong enough to resist the social repercussions of the new sort of Brahmanical Hinduism, which now spread up into the Himalayas. From being a comparatively free society, the main classes of Nepal now became caste-conscious after the Hindu pattern (for there was no Buddhist model to follow), and the idea of ritual purity as a social idea became gradually accepted. King Jayasthitimalla (in power 1382-1395) was the first to give official sanction to a formal caste system, embracing both Brahmans and Buddhist « monks » and the two general divisions of their clientèle (3). The remarkable way in which Buddhism has survived, limited as it is to its old ritual forms, in a social framework essentially foreign to it, bears witness to its considerable strength, at least in the main Newar towns of Pātan, old Kathmandu and probably also old Bhatgaon.

(1) The *vajrācārya* (known in Newāri as *Gubhāju*) is consecrated by the ceremony named in Newāri *acaḥ-luyegu* (Sanskrit : *ācāryābhiṣeka*). This ceremony is properly the first of a set of four belonging to the traditional practice of the tantric yogins. See my edition of the *Hevajra-tantra*, Oxford University Press, 1959, Part I, p. 34 and p. 131.

(2) In 1287-1288, 1290, again in 1313, and finally in 1328, the Valley was invaded by the Khas Malla kings, who ruled over what is now the Jumla district of Western Nepal. (Concerning these kings see G. TUCCI, *Preliminary Report*, pp. 43 ff., and L. PETECH, *Mediaeval History*, pp. 102 ff.) In 1289 and again in 1311 it was invaded by the ruler of Tirhut (northern Bihar). In 1346 and 1349 it suffered invasion and destruction in the name of Islām by Sultan Shams ud-din, who came from Bengal. (See PETECH, *op. cit.*, pp. 118 ff.)

(3) See Sylvain LÉVI, *Le Népal*, I, pp. 230-236.

After six centuries it is still successfully engaged in resisting the prestige-appeal of Brahmanical religion. The deliberate attempt to denigrate Buddhism is the work of the Gorkha dynasty and dates only from the middle of the last century.

The whole culture with which we are concerned, is concentrated within less than 250 square miles. The two main types of shrine, which demand detailed discussion, are the *caitya* and the tiered-roof temple, usually referred to by Westerners as *pagoda* or *pagode*. Both types exist in very large numbers. There are more than two hundred *vihāras*, concentrated mainly in Pātan and Kathmandu. Many of these were never monasteries in the proper sense, for they have been built since the *bare* ceased to be real monks. Moreover, however old the foundations may be, it is unlikely that any of the existing buildings are older than the 14th century; most assumed their present form in the 17th and 18th centuries. The tiered-roof temples, either forming part of the *vihāras* or standing free in squares and courtyards, are likewise concentrated in the main cities. Bhatgaon, being now mainly a Hindu city, contains a large number of very beautiful free-standing temples. At Kīrtipur, which was established as a kind of outpost of Pātan in the 12th century, there is one very beautiful 16th century temple (that of Bhairava). Then there are the temples which mark special sites as places of pilgrimage: Paśupati and Guhyeśvarī on the banks of the Bagmati, Viṣṇu's temple at *Cāngu* (Cāngu-narayana), Vajrayoginī (properly to be known as Khaḍgayoginī) above Sankhu, Vajrayoginī above Pharping, Vidyēśvarī (in the form of a *vihāra*), standing on the right bank of the Viṣṇumati on the way from Kathmandu to Śeṅgu. Finally there are innumerable little temples, erected in towns and villages and by waysides throughout the whole Valley.

Besides the four great Pātan *caityas* (1) and those on Śeṅgu (2) there are several important ones, *Khāsti* (3) and *Cā-bāhī* (4), both a few miles north of Pātan by the Sankhu road, *Cilandya* (5) in north-west Pātan, *Cilandya* on the southern end of the Kīrtipur hill, and the *Sighaḥ-bāhā* (6) *caitya* towards the north of Kathmandu [22] (7). Then there are a number of medium-sized *caityas*, set in the courtyards of the more important *vihāras*, e. g. those of the *Tham-bāhī* [11] and the *Yatkā-bāhā* [19] in Kathmandu, or

(1) I use the term *caitya* (rather than *stūpa*) merely because it is used by educated Newars. The original Newārī term is *cibā*, but this is not in general use. People just refer to these shrines as *dya* (« god »), but this fails to distinguish image, *caitya* or any kind of sacred stone, for all are called *dya*.

(2) *Śeṅgu* (possibly a contraction of *Śrī-Yeṃ-guṃ*, « Glorious Hill of Yeṃ » [Kathmandu]) is the local Newārī name for the whole hill. The main shrine on the summit is known as *Svayambhū*, « Self-Existent », abbreviated to *Śimbhu*. This last name is used by Nepālī-speakers to refer to the shrine or the whole site.

(3) *Khāsti* may be an odd abbreviation of *Kāśyapa-caitya*, for this shrine is supposed to contain the relics of Kāśyapa Buddha. OLDFIELD (*Sketches from Nīpal*, II, pp. 260-264) quotes a form of the name as « Kasha Chait ». By Nepālī-speakers it is called *Bauddha* and more rarely *Bodhnāth*.

(4) *Cā-bāhī* is said to be an abbreviation of *Carumati-vihāra*, named after its foundress, supposedly Aśoka's daughter.

(5) *Cilandya* is another odd abbreviated name. It appears in an inscription (*Nepāl-saṃvat*, 477) on the front of the Pātan *caitya* as *caityaram(ja ?)*. The use of *dya* is explained in note 1 above.

(6) *Sighaḥ* is a contraction of *skr. Śrī-ghaṭa*, « Glorious Jar »; there is a set of five jars in the main shrine of this *vihāra*.

(7) Such figures or letters in square brackets associated with the names Kathmandu, Pātan and Bhatgaon, are location-references, as shown on the sketch-maps of these three main cities (pp. 117-120).

those of the *Woku-bāhā* [3] and the *Guita-bāhā* [17-19] in Pātan. There are also several splendid *caityas* of similar proportions in the old north-eastern corner of Bhatgaon. Finally there are the innumerable little *caityas*, adorning squares and courtyards and the old *praṇālī* (watering-places). Corresponding with the Buddhist *caityas* are the not so numerous *śiva-līṅgas*, set up to mark sacred spots (1).

There are miscellaneous Hindu shrines of various kinds, wayside images, tree-shrines, and tanks, of which the most important are those containing the images of Viṣṇu (Nārāyaṇa) at Buḍha-Nilkaṇṭha and Bālaju. Then there are the indigenous Newar shrines, ancestral stones (*digu-dya*) and locality gods (*luku-mādyā*) (2).

With so much material available, there should be no difficulty, one might think, in developing a firm chronology, which being related with established historical facts, would enable us to reconstruct much of Nepal's cultural past. But this hope is defeated by the very smallness of the area, in which everything has been concentrated, for the past has continually been cleared away to make room for the present. It is impossible of course that everything early should have disappeared, and to the little that remains we shall refer. One is also assisted by the persistence with which early traditions have survived. The crafts of mediaeval Nepal, wood-carving, metal-casting, engraving and filigree-work, sculpturing in stone and crystal, flourished unremittingly up to the Gorkha conquest, and except perhaps for the art of wood-carving, they continue to the present day. Likewise the type of architecture, by changing so little through the centuries, has left Nepal as a unique survivor from among the many Asian countries who received so much of their civilization from the India of a thousand years ago.

(To be continued.)

(1) Concerning these see T. W. CLARK, The *Rāni Pokhri* Inscription, Kāṭhmāṇḍu, *B.S.O.A.S.*, 1957, XX, pp. 173-174.

(2) The literal meaning of these terms is uncertain. *Digu-dya* may just mean « god of worship ». These stones, mostly set in open ground or by streams, seem to be symbols of family well-being. *Luku-mādyā* may mean « concealed Mahādeva (Śiva) ». These are stones set below ground-level in many localities. They receive worship at a yearly ceremony. The use of *līṅga* instead of stones and of the name Mahādeva presumably developed under Brahmanical influence. Concerning other examples of stone-worship see p. 114.